

Chapter -80

Since I was suddenly on a timer to feed my stupid new familiar, we went back towards the elevator shaft that led up into the Mall. I used my longboard, which miraculously hadn't expired while I'd been busy killing Liam for a second time, to make my way across the still-burning cocoon structure. Thanks to the board's disregard for physics, I could grind across roiling flames and ramp up vertical columns of fire.

Bee was flying high above, calling out scores for each of my tricks. I'd never been very good with a skateboard in the past, at least never to the point that it would come to me this easily, so it was clear that the sentient longboard was doing a lot of heavy lifting.

[GNARLY!]

“If I had picked the Vespa, do you think riding it would have made me fluent in Italian?” I asked Panda, who was clinging on to my shoulder as I flipped through the air. Lordie was sitting atop my head like he was a hat and seemed to have no issue staying attached to me, although his long fingernails were digging into my scalp.

My front wheels hit the side of a coiling flame and I rode it down towards the ground, with a ton of momentum built up and the boosts from the many tricks increasing my speed.

“What???” he asked. “I don't know. But you shouldn't be focusing on that! Think about what a hand-spider might like to eat. Your life depends on it!”

“You're only panicked because you think your life might also depend on it.”

“Obviously!”

Bee floated down towards me, grabbing my shoulders to borrow my speed, while remaining airborne like a humanoid kite.

“Maybe it feeds on the same thing as the Boss Monstrosity?” she suggested. “It was called the Lord of Sinners, so maybe sin is its favorite meal?”

“If that was the case, it would already be full to the point of bursting,” the plushie retorted.

“Oy. Hmm, actually no, you're probably right.”

“It has to be something profoundly-stupid, I'm sure of it,” Panda remarked.

While I was climbing up through the elevator shaft using the service ladder, with Bee flapping her wings just enough to keep pace with me, I couldn't help but wonder who had set Logan on the path

to the Mayor. It had to have been someone that knew me well, or perhaps the Great Game Agencies, like the REPD and Minor Collectors, were behind it. Although it seemed unlikely that they’d team up with a Player directly.

“You know what I think?” Panda asked, but was immediately interrupted by an announcement. I clenched my teeth as I read it.

SAFE ZONE ALERT!

The safety feature is now functional and acts of violence will result in forceful expulsion from the Safe Zone, as intended.

If you have yet to receive your Bug Victim Compensation, you can contact our hotline by uttering the phrase ‘Call Bug Victim Hotline’. A Representative from our Bug Handling Department will get in touch with you sometime within the next eight business days, so do not hang up the call!

I breathed a sigh of relief that it wasn’t a city-wide alert that Logan had killed the Mayor and claimed the Safe Zone Sphere he carried.

“Anyway, as I was saying—”

Congratulations! You have unlocked an achievement! ^x
<i>‘Bad Boy’</i> Failed a Benefactor Quest.
<i>Benefactors aren’t allowed to give Quests that cannot be completed by their chosen Players, so, if you fail a quest, it’s entirely your own fault.</i>
<i>Word of advice: if you survive your incoming Penalty, try to learn from the mistakes of the past and consider how much you value your own personal integrity versus staying alive.</i>
Reward: Whatever your Benefactor has in store for you

Benefactor Penalty

*This is a **Penalty** given to you by your Benefactor for failing to complete a task.*

**You did not fulfil the requirements of the Quest I gave you.
I am very cross with you, my Dear.**

While I normally would send one of my little Lustlings to flense the skin and flesh from your bones, a new problem has presented itself and you are uniquely suited to solving it.

Your penalty is to seek out and kill Clive of the Nasty Neighborhood’s Beneficiary, ‘Logan Maximillian’. That vile gremlin gave half of my favorite playthings pustulant warts, so get rid of his new toy for me.

Be a Good Boy and do not disappoint me a second time.

Miranda

“Goddamn it!” Panda exclaimed.

“Is this what you were trying to say?” I asked him.

“Yes! I knew this kind of development smelled of Demon dung.”

“So, this Demon named Clive is Logan’s Benefactor and knew that I was sponsored by Miranda, so he’s seeking to mock me by stealing my revenge?”

“Exactly.”

“I was sure that the Agencies were in on it too,” I muttered.

“They might be pulling the strings from the shadows, but I think they would rather get rid of you themselves. That being said, they definitely wouldn’t miss the opportunity to strike while you’re focused on Logan, so keep your guard up.”

I reached the top of the elevator shaft and climbed out.

“But first, pet food...”

The first thing we did was look for a Pawn Shop. There were fortunately several of those scattered across the Mall and no other Players should be hogging them, since this place was now like Ground Zero, thanks to the Lord’s curse.

As we walked across the mounds of dead hand-spiders covering most of the first floor, Lordie perked up from where he clung to my head and seemed to scowl down at the corpses.

“*Meow!*”

“Why does he sound arrogant?” Bee wondered.

“I’m more curious about where his voice is coming out of,” Panda mused.

“Maybe he thinks he’s better than his fellows, since he’s still alive?” I guessed.

“Not for long though.”

I ignored his jab, and instead wondered, “Perhaps there’s a way I can see his info through a verbal command.” Bee had tried to appraise and inspect Lordie, but neither had worked to give any deep insight other than: ‘*Gambit’s Familiar*’

“Try ‘Familiar Status’,” Panda suggested.

“*Familiar Status*,” I said and immediately the System responded to it. I shared the pop-up with Bee with a single thought.

‘Lordie’	
MATURITY	4%
HUNGER	Starving
FAVOURITE FOODS	
????	

“That’s kind of useless to be honest.”

“It might expand when he matures,” Bee said.

We came to a stop in front of a Pawn Shop that, from the outside, looked like it sold adult toys. It was in large part thanks to the pink neon signs that stated things like, ‘Deals that’ll make you hard!’

and ‘You’ll want to come inside, our store!’ The walls and door were made of clouded glass and it was impossible to tell what they actually sold.

There was a shrimp humanoid with way too many arms, or maybe they were legs, sitting in a lawn-chair in front of the door. He had aviator sunglasses covering his eyes and a sheriff’s badge pinned to the middle of his chest of orange-pink overlapping carapace.

“Woah, woah! Only one at a time, folks!” he exclaimed with way more volume than was necessary.

“I’ll wait out here,” Bee told me.

The shrimp guard pressed a button and the door swung open, sending smooth jazz tunes out into the hall. I quickly entered and it shut behind me, trapping me with the music and the smell of latex.

“What ‘chu got!?” asked a creature from within a metal cage that had a little counter attached to the front of it. I walked directly up to it without bothering to look around, as the inventory on display was entirely fishing related, with more than fifty different types of lures, some of which were clearly designed by people who didn’t hunt regular fish.

“Do you sell pet food?”

“Sure do!” the creature said.

It looked vaguely like a humanoid, but everything about it was wrong. Its skin was milky-white and translucent, its black dot-for-eyes were spread too widely apart, its smile was also just too wide, and it had six protrusions from the sides of its large face that were covered in red frills.

Clearly, it was an alien.

“Gambit, it’s an Axolotl. How do you not recognize that?”

The Vendor placed a bag of dog food, a can of cat food, a banana, a fly the size of a frog, a frog the size of a fly, and many other oddities on its side of the cage.

I pulled Lordie down from the top of my head and let him inspect the stuff, but he almost immediately ignored all of it except the can of cat food.

“I guess I’ll take *that*,” I said and pointed to the can.

“Yessir! That’ll be 60 Coins please.”

“...Are you serious?”

“It’s a rare commodity.”

“I mean that’s absurd. It doesn’t even have a tap to pull it open!”

“If you want a can-opener included in the purchase, then that’ll be 8060 Coins please.”

“What!?”

“Can-openers are useful in an apocalypse,” Panda muttered, nodding to himself.

“I’ll just take the can then... Actually, do you buy Familiars?”

The Axolotl paused and looked at Lordie, who was bouncing on the tips of his fingers eagerly. “I’m sure he would fetch a good price, but you would have to die since its bonded to you. If you find another that isn’t bound, I’ll buy it though!”

“Worth a shot,” Panda said, trying to console me.

I handed the Vendor the frankly absurd amount of coins and left the shop, with Lordie clinging to the arm that held the can in it.

“Did you find any?” Bee asked when I came back out into the hallway.

“Yeah, cost me an arm and a leg though...”

I squatted down and tore off the lid of the can, but before I could even set it down or anything, Lordie had seized it from my hand and placed the ‘palm’ of his body over the opening. Loud slurping and gnashing sounds came from the hand-spider as it devoured the contents in seconds.

“At least he seems to like it,” Panda said.

“Let’s see how much that did. *Familiar Status*.”

‘Lordie’	
MATURITY	5%
HUNGER	Peckish
FAVOURITE FOODS	
????	
‘Canned Cat Food’	

“Goddamn it.”

Although I wasn’t in immediate danger of Lordie starving and taking me to the grave with him, we still spent the next twenty minutes scouring every shop that seemed like it might sell edible things, since I didn’t want to have to go scavenging when we went after Logan. But the entire time, Logan was all I could think of, as every minute wasted was a minute longer he could spend trying to steal my revenge.

True to the first Vendor’s words, cat food was impossible to source from anywhere, and we soon ran out of shops after going through the entire Mall. I decided to go check on the Safe Zone Terminal, since it might hold the answers, but on the way to it, we bumped into the giant crab with suitcases on its back. I remembered that the Healer had called it ‘the Wandering Crab’ and that I could use my tokens to have it tell me a story.

“Howdy,” he said in a heavy southern accent.

“Hey, do you sell cat food?” I asked him.

“Can’t say I do, partner.”

I sighed. We’d officially tried everywhere except the Healer now, and I didn’t think that Lordie ate honey, plus, that would be like a hundred Coins per serving.

“I’ve got Familiar food, I reckon,” the crab then said to my surprise, before reaching back with his massive right claw and lifting a suitcase off his shell and placing it in front of us. Using his mandibles, he opened it and revealed that it was full of candy.

“*Meow!!*”

Lordie immediately went bananas where he clung to the top of my head, and I had to hold him back to stop him from eating everything in the suitcase.

“Mhmm, little ones like Twizzlers the most,” the crab said.

“Are these safe for human consumption too?” Bee asked.

I wanted to point out that she was no longer human, but refrained.

“I’ll buy all the Twizzlers you have,” I told him.

“Eighty Coins sound fair, partner? I’ve only got six pounds. And yes, little girl, these are safe for you to eat.”

I handed him eighty Coins before he could change his mind and several bags in the open suitcase immediately vanished into my inventory. Compared to the Pawn Shop, I’d gotten an insanely good price per pound.

Before Lordie could rip my scalp off in excitement, I pulled a bag out and handed it to him. The hand-spider put it into his mouth and climbed down from my head to eat it on the ground. Using his finger legs, he opened the candy bag and began slurping the Twizzlers like they were spaghetti noodles.

When he was done, he climbed back onto my head, apparently satisfied.

We said goodbye to the Wandering Crab and continued towards the bathrooms that held the Safe Zone Terminal.

“Y’all have a good day now,” he called.

“He was nice. Even though he called me a little girl,” Bee said, while chewing on some bubblegum she’d purchased from him.

“What does the Hunger indicator say now?” Panda asked.

I brought the Familiar Status up again:

‘Lordie’	
MATURITY	5%
HUNGER	Satisfied
FAVOURITE FOODS	
‘Twizzlers’	
‘Canned Cat Food’	

Congratulations! You have unlocked an achievement! ✖
<i>‘The Trials of being a Pet Owner’</i>
Discovered the #1 Favorite Food of your Familiar.
<i>Taking care of a pet isn’t easy. They can’t talk and tell you what’s wrong with them, so you need to figure that out yourself.</i>
<i>Good job learning what your new Familiar likes, but, then again, you didn’t have much of a choice. Hopefully you can bond with it well before the first Maturity Milestone Challenge hits.</i>
<i>Good luck!</i>
Reward: 20x ‘Game Coins’

“Who would’ve thought candy was the answer?” I muttered. “I don’t like the sound of the Maturity Challenge though...”

When we reached the bathrooms, I looked around just in case there were any Players hiding nearby, but the Mall was utterly deserted aside from the Merchants.

“I’ve been thinking, Gambit, and don’t take this the wrong way. But, why don’t you just let it go? You’ll end up in much less trouble if you could just let things stay in the past.”

“You’re right…” I said with a heavy sigh. “It was so long ago, and he’s probably already dead anyway.”

“Exactly! I’m so glad you’re finally seeing reason!”

“Do you think they gave him a funeral?”

“What?”

“When he died. Do you think they gave Kevin a funeral?”

“I’m not talking about your dumb frog, you imbecile! I’m talking about the Mayor obviously!”

“He ruined my life, Panda. Of course I can’t let that go.”

Bee made a ‘come over here’ signal with her hand, from where she stood next to the bathroom door. “I think someone is inside!” she whisper-yelled.

I immediately pushed the bathroom door open, my right fist pulled back and ready to kill whatever monster had snuck in.

“Don’t hit me!” yelled a familiar voice.

“Steve…? Why are *you* still here?”

“So what if I’ve been hiding here since Samantha died!? Sue me!”

Bee came in behind me and the Birthday Brat glared at her. She had after all stuffed his mouth full of toilet paper last they’d seen each other. Granted, he’d deserved it.

“What’s your insanity at?” I asked him, wary of witnessing another Boss Monstrosity.

“Thirty-something percent,” he replied. “I’ve been too scared to leave, but supposedly the Pharmacists on the second floor sells pills to lower it.”

We’d visited that store, but only with the focus on finding cat food. In hindsight, I should’ve looked through their various merchandise.

“Why are you two back here again? Haven’t you ruined everything enough already?”

“I killed Samantha’s murderers. I’m the Owner of the Safe Zone now,” I told him.

“Then do something about the stench already!” he complained, immediately switching to angry tenant mode. The stench he was complaining about was the foul smell of blood that permeated the bathroom, as well as most of the hallways in the Mall where people had died.

I had half a mind to punch his head in, but somehow managed by just pushing him aside as I went over to the Terminal.

“You might as well see if it has the ability to clean-up the hand-spiders,” Bee commented. “After all, they don’t seem to disappear like all the dead Players.”

The moment I touched the Terminal screen, my vision became filled with overlapping boxes full of text. Suddenly, I was faced with something out of a building management sim.

I frowned at the information overload.

“Ugh. Bee, you do it. I don’t want to be the Owner anymore.”

Ownership Transferal Confirmation Required
<i>You are about to transfer your Ownership of the Safe Zone:</i> <i>‘Serenity Park Mall’</i> <i>To Player:</i> <i>‘Bee’</i> <i>Do you wish to proceed?</i>
YES ——— NO

I clicked ‘yes’ without a second thought and she made a little sound in surprise, as the notification hit both of us.

SAFE ZONE ALERT!

You are no longer the Owner of the **Safe Zone: Serenity Park Mall**

Method of Ownership Transferal: Abdication

New Owner: Bee

With a little hop of joy, she went over to the Terminal and touched her hand to it. She let out an excited squeal and said, “It’s like The Sims and Prison Architect had a baby!”

Steve looked between us, before noticing Lordie.

“Why is there a hand on top of your head?”

“*Meow.*”

I ignored him and told Bee, “Don’t take too long. I want to go get Logan before it’s too late!”

“Just a minute,” she said in a voice that made it sound like she’d spend a lot more than just a minute before she was done. A rumble was already rolling through the floor from whatever she was doing, and a peek out of the bathroom revealed that an army of Roombas were moving down the length of the hallways, cleaning the stained floor, walls, and ceiling.

“Are you going somewhere?” Steve asked. “Can I come with you?”

“Absolutely not,” I told him.

“You should bring him,” Panda said.

“You just told me to give up my revenge, now you want to bring *this guy* along?? Make up your mind.”

“Who are you talking to? You know I can hear you, right?”

“Shut up, Steve.”

His jaw muscles tightened, but he held back whatever retort that’d been locked-and-loaded. It seemed like he *really* didn’t want to be left alone, and I briefly thought back to the guy Samantha had killed when she set up the Sphere. His blood still covered the floor of the bathroom we were in.

I sighed.

“Fine, you can come along under one condition.”

His eyes widened in apparent joy, which was an expression that didn’t suit his sourly face well. “What?”

“No more ‘Steve Says’!”

“Of course not! I promise!”

I considered how powerful his toolset might actually be, plus Bee and I lacked someone that could buff us up. Not that we truly needed it. But mainly, leaving him alone here would probably lead to him going insane, and we couldn’t have that. At the first sign of trouble, I’d personally take him out. And maybe keeping him close would steer him away from all the mess he’d been up to in the past, although I had very little faith in his reformation into an acceptable person.

“You’ve grown a lot, Gambit. I’m proud of you,” Panda said.

“Stop that, you’re setting up a major Death Flag right now. This isn’t like the end or anything, so a lot of things can still go wr—”